

Dana White's White Whale: The UFC Chased Fedor for Years, but He Always Got Away

[Karim Zidan](#) February 14, 2017



Jeff Chiu/Associated Press

The massive, stoic Russian perched on a chaise lounge in blissful comfort on a gorgeous beach. It was July 2009, and [Fedor Emelianenko](#), the baddest man on the planet, was on holiday.

He should have been in the final days of training for his heavyweight fight with Josh Barnett at Affliction: Trilogy in Anaheim, California, but that event, and Affliction Entertainment itself, had shut down in the wake of Barnett's positive test for a banned substance. Fedor had only learned of the cancellation when he arrived in California.

So he brought his family to a favorite destination, the island nation of Curacao, with its colorful buildings, majestic palm trees and gorgeous beaches. They relaxed in the dry, Caribbean heat—a welcome contrast to the bitter cold in Stary Oskol, Russia. Fedor swam, ate and played with his daughters away from the public eye and the mixed martial arts circus.

That is, until his family time was unceremoniously interrupted one afternoon by Zuffa and UFC owners [Dana White](#) and Lorenzo Fertitta, who had flown in to negotiate a potential deal with the Russian's management team.

At the time, the top heavyweight on the planet—his knockout win over Andrei Arlovski six months earlier had brought his win streak to 26—was managed by Vadim Finkelchtein, a tall Russian with businesses in St. Petersburg and the Netherlands, including an ownership stake in mixed martial arts organization M-1 Global, which he had founded in 1997. The Russian promotion's main financier, influential banker Sergey Matviyenko, was also present.



Fedor poses with Oscar de la Hoya after knocking out Andrei Arlovski in January 2009. Jon P. Kopaloff/Getty Images

With a net worth of [several billion](#) dollars [between them](#), the parties collected near one of the island's many beaches to break bread. Not known for his patience and diplomacy, White made an offer to sign Fedor and threw in a deal to purchase M-1 Global, Finkelchtein told the Russian publication *Prosport* (h/t [Bloody Elbow](#)). The language barrier made matters more difficult as tension began to run high.

While the figure offered remains a mystery (rumored as [high as \\$30 million](#) and to include a blockbuster matchup against Brock Lesnar, per CBS Radio's Carmichael Dave), it was insulting enough to make Matviyenko—at that point resting silently on a lounge chair—jump to his feet and laugh.

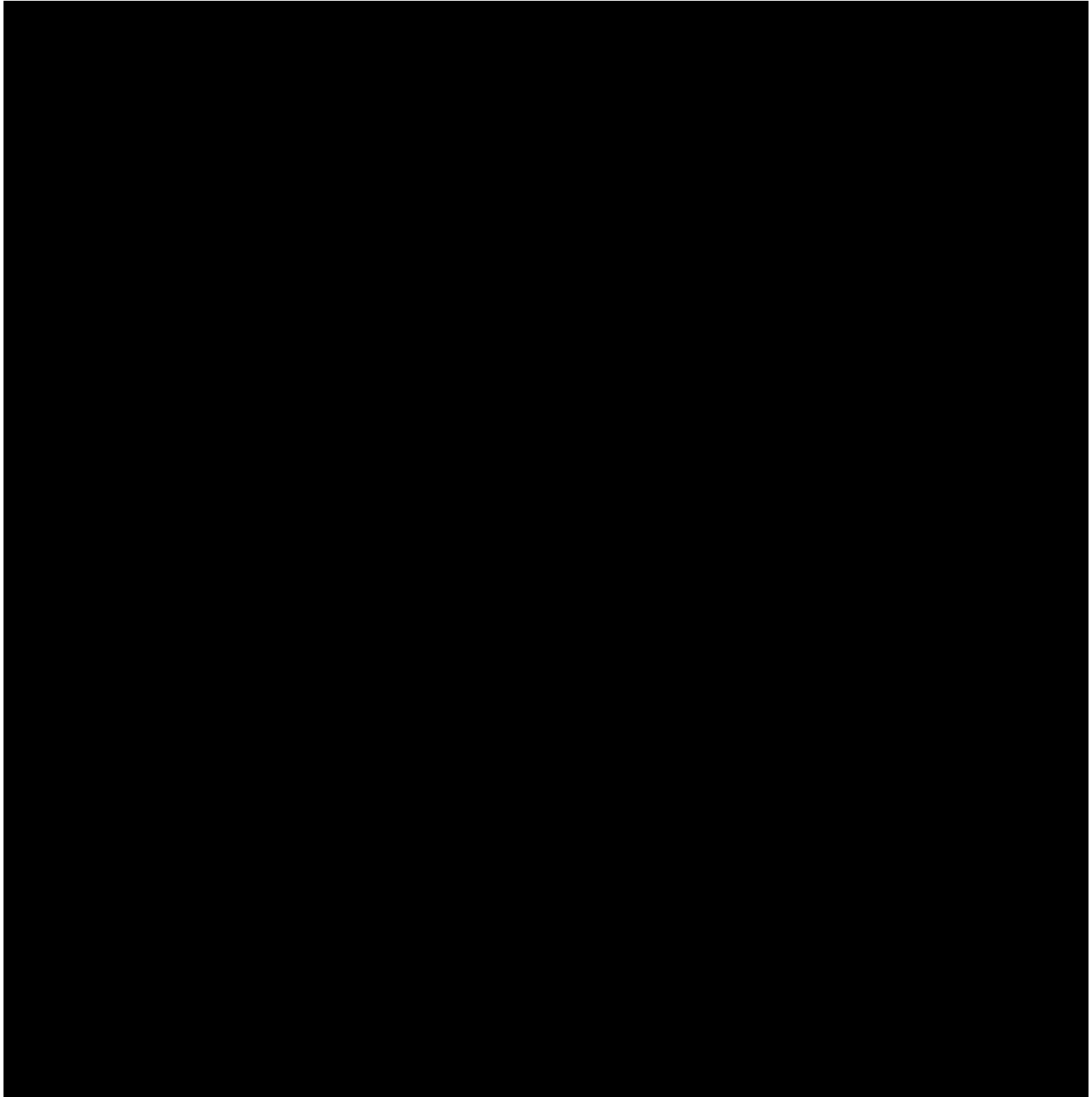
Matviyenko—vice president of one of the largest banks in the Russian Federation and son of Valentina Matviyenko, one of the most powerful women in Russian politics—was clearly unimpressed with the offer. As M-1 Global's majority shareholder, Matviyenko's opinion was pivotal. The Russians had rejected the world's largest [MMA](#) promotion. It wasn't the first time, and it wouldn't be the last.

White has spoken harshly of Fedor, dismissed his talents, called his management liars. But for almost a decade, he's kept up the chase. Fedor Emelianenko, who once again will fight under a non-UFC banner when he meets Matt Mitrione at Bellator 172 on Saturday, is his white whale.

Only those who attended the famous "island meeting" can recall the series of events that unfolded on that summer's day in Curacao. Unfortunately, both sides have given vastly different accounts of the infamous encounter.

White's [expletive-filled retelling](#) (**warning: NSFW language in link**) to reporters involved Russians who thought they were "too cool, too slick and too f--king funny" to make a deal with the UFC. He claimed that he offered Fedor a matchup against Lesnar and the most lucrative contract in UFC history up to that point.

The UFC president told the media that at one point, [he warned Fedor](#) (warning: NSFW language in link) of a danger every fighter at a peak earning opportunity faces: "You're one punch away from being worth zero."



The Russians, however, remember matters differently. In the *Prosport* interview, Finkelchtein called the UFC's proposal that day a "normal" one, while Fedor told MMAFighting.com's [Chuck Mindenhall](#) the promotion never mentioned Lesnar until after the Russian retired in 2012. Fedor also stressed that it was White's brash attitude that helped stir the tension, while Finkelchtein maintained that the UFC had exaggerated M-1's demands and offered a contract that would have tied him exclusively to UFC.

There were many other opportunities to secure a deal with the Last Emperor, but that fateful day on the beach was as close as the two sides would ever come to getting together. Close to six years later, when Finkelchtein was asked whether he would have offered a different answer than Matviyenko had he owned M-1 at the time of the island encounter, he said, "I do not know, honestly. Maybe I would have sold," per Bloody Elbow.

Had things played out differently that day—had the difficult Matviyenko not been M-1 Global's majority stakeholder and commanding voice, or had billionaire egos not exacerbated tensions—the greatest heavyweight in mixed martial arts history could have showcased his unparalleled talents inside the UFC Octagon.

We are left instead with a tale of what could have been and why it never came to be.

Pride before the Fall

On the final evening of 2006, Fedor Emelianenko defended his Pride heavyweight title for the fourth and last time at the promotion's annual New Year's Eve event at the Saitama Super Arena in Japan.

He spent most of the bout trapped beneath challenger Mark Hunt, a heavyweight kickboxer from New Zealand with 50 pounds on Fedor but little grappling experience. In the ninth minute, the champion pounced and finished the fight with a slick kimura that yielded an instant tap.

Years later, Hunt [recalled](#) the fight in his autobiography, admitting that "If there was one dude who knew how to finish a submission, it was Fedor."



Fedor grapples with Brett Rogers in 2009. Paul Beatty/Associated Press

Hunt's show of respect was typical of the public discourse around Fedor. At the time, he was considered the greatest heavyweight to grace the sport and potentially the best pound-for-pound talent in its short history.

His mystique was equal parts inexplicable athleticism and stoic personality that craved little attention but commanded the spotlight all the same. His modest Russian background and pious disposition perfectly contrasted with his violent profession—human traits in a superhuman character.

Pride's dissolution in 2007, coupled with an expired contract, meant that the Last Emperor was a free agent seemingly ripe for the UFC's picking. Having purchased its Japanese rival, the U.S. flagship organization made it seem inevitable that it would get the heavyweight champ to cross over. White [explained](#) to the media at UFC 76 that it would be "crazy for him to fight anywhere else other than the UFC."

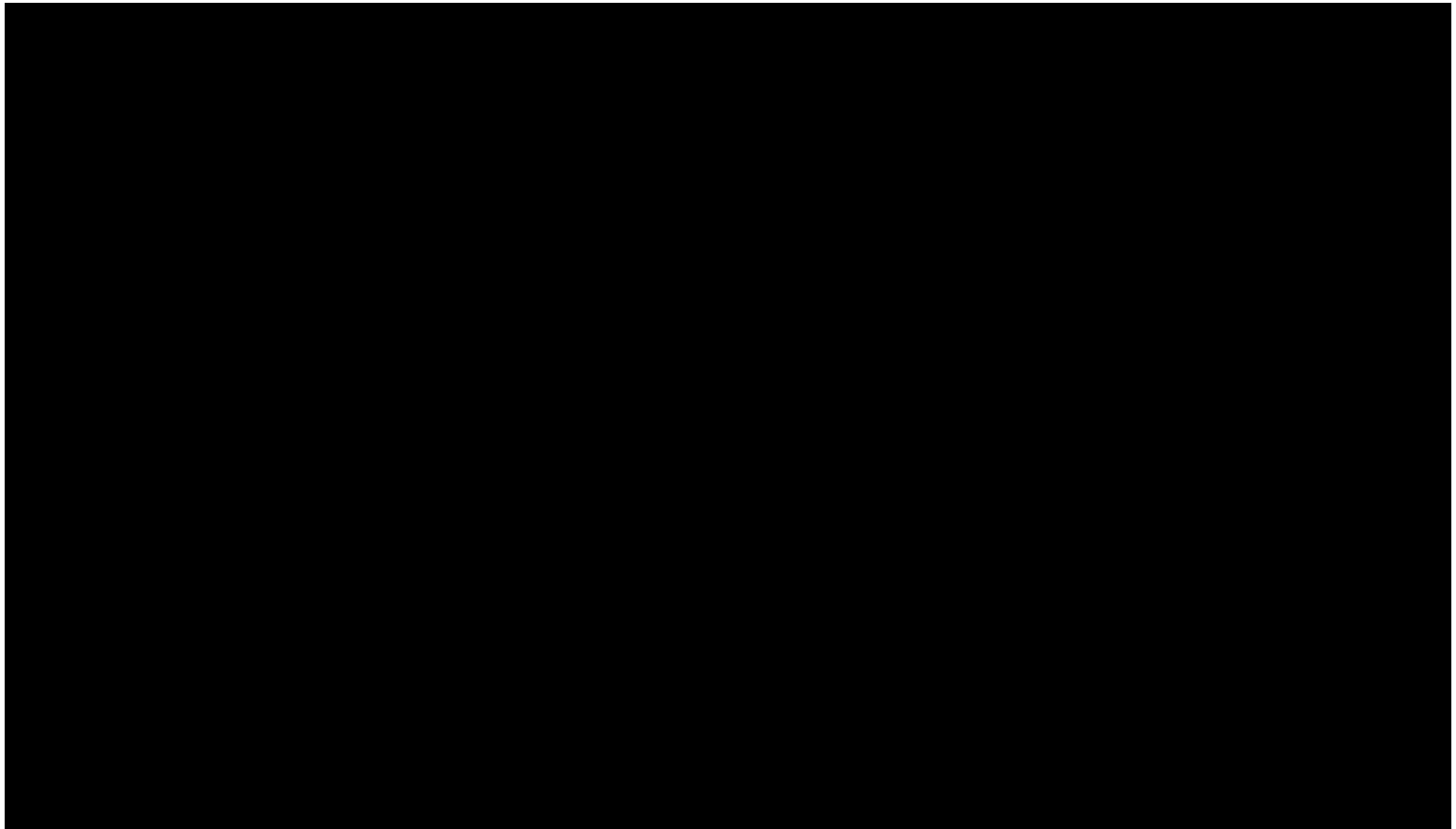
Even most MMA fans believed it was simply a matter of when, not if, the top free agent on the market joined the UFC.

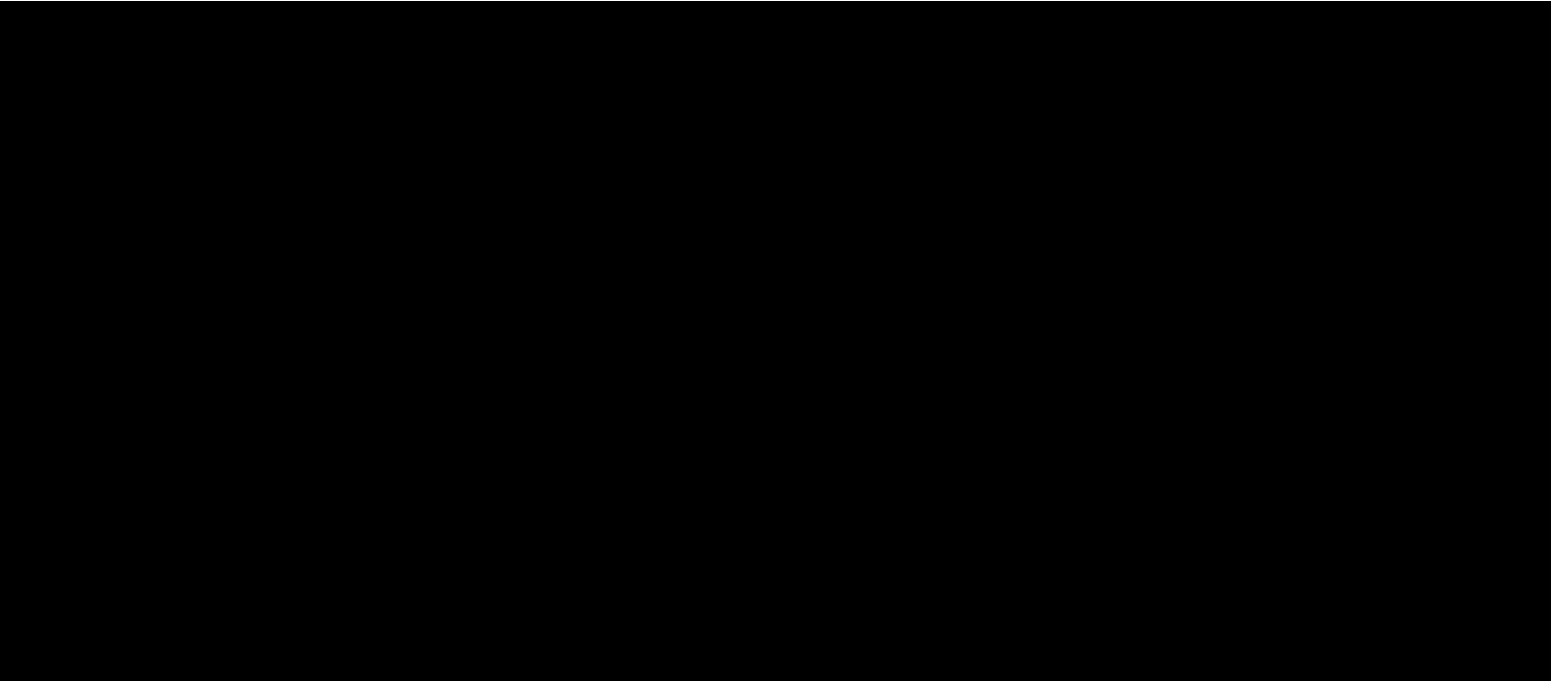
Instead, Fedor [held a press conference](#) in New York City on October 22, 2007, and announced he had signed with M-1 Global as the promotion's centerpiece.

M-1 Global had undergone significant changes. Finkelchtein, who'd founded the promotion in 1997 as Russia's first professional MMA show, sold his majority share to Sibling Sports, LLC. The new owners hired longtime MMA promoter Monte Cox as CEO. With an influx of money and an ambitious plan to produce regular international shows across Europe and the United States, the promotion looked to Fedor to be its ambassador.

Despite the unexpected signing, Fedor had the option to compete in various promotions, depending on whether they could meet his lofty contractual demands. According to MMAWeekly.com's [Ken Pishna](#), M-1 Global explained that Fedor's contract has a "clause to offer the UFC champion \$1 million over and above what the UFC would offer their champion to fight Fedor, and \$1 million to the winner of that fight over the general purse for that fight."

At the time, this was far above what the UFC was interested in paying.





The press conference was also where the co-promotion negotiation tactic first surfaced in the Fedor saga.

"We really want to work with all of the other organizations," Cox said, per Pishna. Referring to UFC heavyweight champion Randy Couture's split with the company days earlier, he said, "If the UFC gets Randy back and they call and want Fedor to fight, we'll send him to the UFC."

Three days later, a frustrated Dana White appeared on a [UFC conference call](#) (h/t All Wrestling) with Lesnar, Chuck Liddell and Wanderlei Silva.

The media call was scheduled to discuss a renewed TV deal with Spike TV, Lesnar's anticipated UFC debut and the Liddell vs. Silva fight at UFC 79. However, one media member's mention of Fedor was enough to divert White's attention. Asked his opinion about Fedor's decision to sign with M-1 Global, the UFC's head honcho said, "Fedor sucks."

White went on to blame Fedor's management for the UFC's inability to sign the heavyweight. He referred to Finkelchtein as a "f--king liar" and said his management team is "full of s--t." Fuming, White closed out his rant with a definitive statement: "Fedor isn't even a top-five heavyweight, let alone top pound-for-pound. ... Good luck to him wherever he's fighting because I don't want him in UFC.

"Do I need to say anything else?"

Maybe not, but the UFC president would nonetheless spend the next few years chasing his white whale.